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# Social Movement Adaptation: The Case of the Christian Right and Stem Cell Research

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*At any given time, a multitude of political issues spur interest group and social movement activism. Embryonic stem-cell research is an example of one such controversial issue that has not been studied in any depth. This article seeks to examine the Christian Right's activism on this issue by placing that activism within the context of social movement and framing theory, and by providing a content analysis of the rhetoric employed by the Christian Right's more powerful interest groups. Key conclusions drawn are that this activism against stem-cell research indicates that the Christian Right movement has matured, and that this maturation is a prime example of social movement adaptation.*

Political activism is in a constant process of evolution. Actors try to find new ways to become effective while adapting to the constantly changing political environment. Interest groups that become attached to larger social movements are no exception. In fact, it is in these groups that we can sometimes see the most dramatic adaptation and change. For groups seeking substantial social change, immediate success is most unlikely. Instead, the grievances of movement supporters grow more entrenched and organizations settle into the political environment, often adjusting their tactics to secure greater success. Activism by the religious right has shown no exception

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to this process; in fact, activism by the religious right has exemplified many of the adaptations that characterize other successful movements, such as issue framing (as described by Zald and Ash 1966).

This paper is formulated as a case study of Christian Right activism against embryonic stem-cell research. I begin by briefly describing the historical context of religious right political activity in the United States, and by treating the transformation of the Christian Right (as described by Moen 1992) as an example of Zald and Ash's (1966) description of organizational adaptation. I then describe the Christian Right's political transformation and the use of tactical issue framing as exemplified in the debate over stem-cell research by conducting a content analysis on the language Christian Right organizations have used in mobilizing their supporters. Finally, I draw on Zald and Ash's model of organizational change to show that the Christian Right exemplifies institutionalization.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Marx and McAdam define a social movement as "organized efforts to promote or resist change in society that rely, at least in part, on non-institutionalized forms of political action [such as marches and demonstrations]" (1994, 73). Most social movements take years to succeed, if they do at all. American history contains many more attempted movements than successful ones, and tactical change itself may not be the differentiating factor. However, it is clear that without some sort of adaptation and political sophistication, social movements do not survive. Over time, in order to succeed, movements may become more institutionalized by changing from ad hoc committees and other spontaneous developments to more formal structures, such as leadership organizations (Marx and McAdam

1994, 73). The Christian Right has undergone just such a reformation. Political activity within the religious right is not the same today as it was at its outset, and the movement has continually adapted in conformity to Marx's and McAdam's expectations. Similarly, the organizations that are a part of this movement have adapted to fit Zald's and Ash's description: "The original charismatic leadership is replaced, a bureaucratic structure emerges and a general accommodation to the society occurs" (1966, 327). The literature regarding this transformation describes the Christian Right's movement from a politically inept attempt at social change to an influential, mobilized body that is still very much a part of the American political landscape.

Another theoretical concept of importance to our understanding of social movements is that of issue framing. Benford and Snow describe framing as "an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction. It is active in the sense that something is being done, and processual in the sense of a dynamic and evolving process. It entails agency in the sense that what is evolving is the work of social movement organizations or movement activists" (2000, 614). Issue framing is an active process in which organizers shape the ways in which an issue is perceived and understood by the public and other audiences; the framing process is also crucial in creating and sustaining the relationship between the movement and its identifiers. Based on my research, the Christian Right's framing of embryonic stem-cell research constitutes an attempt both to shape the issue politically and to garner political capital by creating a more personal identity between movement supporters and the movement. The Christian Right, in this context at least, exemplifies social movement transformation and tactical issue framing, concepts more often applied to secular movements. Given the religious component of the movement, there are surely



some differences between it and other movement types, but in terms of movement adaptation and issue framing, the religious right has begun to look more like other political groups seeking social and political change.

### HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The "Christian Right" is a broad label that applies to many different organizations, groups, and personal identities. It has adapted over time to meet the demands of denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, and even those of nondenominational churches and talk radio, but its core ideology has remained the same for a quarter century.

For some time, evangelical Christians in America avoided organized and national political activity (see, e.g., Moen 1992; Oldfield 1996; Wuthnow 1993). However, during the 1960s, evangelicals came to perceive deviant lifestyles as infiltrating everyday life in America. As Oldfield describes it, "Evangelicals created a well-developed subculture within American society ... [and] were moved to political action as that subculture found it harder and harder to insulate itself" (1996, 55). Wilcox views evangelicals as adopting a reactive posture, and defends their place in politics: "If the Christian Right is a defensive movement that seeks to protect religious liberties of conservative Christians, then there can be no question it has an obvious place at the bargaining table of American politics" (2002, 12). Similarly, Fowler, Hertzke and Olson (1999, 151) assert that the "Christian Right's dissent stems from a belief that today's society denies Christians the opportunity to nurture their versions of meaning, morality and community ... the Christian Right emerged to insist that society must be changed."

As a cohesive political movement, the Christian Right is not more than three decades old. It was initially led by four major

groups: Moral Majority, Christian Voice, National Christian Action Coalition (NCAC) and Religious Roundtable (Moen 1992, 16-25). Although these groups had similar goals, they employed very different means. Moral Majority organized marches and rallies, registered voters, and claimed credit for electing Ronald Reagan in 1980. The Christian Voice concentrated its efforts on lobbying in Washington and published a rating of candidates. The NCAC produced newsletters for grassroots supporters, and Religious Roundtable focused on recruiting Southern Baptist pastors into political activity. All four groups met with some success, earning for themselves a place on the political agenda and claiming to register millions of new evangelical voters. But all four groups were also inexperienced and died rather quickly. This rapid decline can be attributed to three overlapping factors: high levels of religious fundamentalism, tactical failures, and limited grassroots support.

Religious fundamentalism encouraged sectarianism that made cooperation and coalition-building difficult. Although not all evangelicals held fundamentalist perspectives, factionalism limited the movement's appeal to small constituencies. According to Wilcox (2002, 6), some leaders attempted to reach out to other religious traditions that they believed hold similar values, such as the Jewish, Catholic, and Mormon faiths (see also Guth et. al. 2002, 163). However, ecumenism was not fully embraced because of the sectarian and exclusive nature of evangelical's view of scripture. Levels of fundamentalism within the movement also made it difficult for leaders to justify the priority they were putting on political involvement over evangelism (Oldfield 1996, 32; see also Wuthnow 1993, 31 and Fowler, Hertzke, and Olson 1999). Finally, denominational differences within evangelicalism, especially differences concerning how politically active one should be, proved problematic for the early Christian Right.

Specific tactical failures of the early groups also contributed to their early collapse. Although the rallies that Moral Majority held may have been uplifting and effective in promoting considerable name recognition, they did not hold long-term promise. The Moral Majority's lobbying arm lost its reputation in Washington and, as a result, the \$11 million in lobbying funds that these rallies had raised proved virtually useless (Moen 1992, 21). Direct mail tactics, as used by the Religious Roundtable, could not sustain supporters' interest, since supporters were often more interested in local rather than national issues. Furthermore, membership in these groups was disorganized, and monetary contributions were often meager. Moen (1992, 29-30) also asserts that the Christian Voice and Moral Majority defined their missions too broadly, while the Religious Roundtable and the National Christian Action Coalition defined purposes too narrowly; and failure was also due to the fact that some of the tactics employed harmed the movement's public image such as their exclusivity and fundamentalist rhetoric. In turn, many of these tactical failures can be traced to the lack of experienced elites at the helm of these organizations.

A final source of early failure was the difficulty the movement had in garnering grassroots support for national political battles. Most grassroots supporters were much more concerned about what was going on in their local areas than they were in the interest group's attempt at national activity. Evidence for this claim is provided by the fact that localization was one of the major, successful changes introduced by movement leaders later in time, and it remains a major source of success for the Christian Right today.

### THE POLITICAL MAKEOVER

The Christian Right movement matured and moved past its early failures. Although in many ways the efficacy and influence of the initial organized groups diminished, the Christian Right movement still had a base, still had grievances, and still had a place on the political agenda. Leadership maturation and institutional secularization stimulated a new phase of activity.

The leadership of the movement became more sophisticated and experienced over time, and they also attracted over time new supporters that often had organizational and other skills crucial to movement success. "Christian Right leaders," observes Oldfield (1996, 220), "learned the political ropes, emerged from under the tutelage of the New Right and the [Republican] Party, and adjusted their strategies in light of experience." Moen (1992, 3) explains that partly as a result, there developed a growing pool of supporters from which to draw new leaders and activists, and Wuthnow (1993, 35) argues that religious leaders began to develop networks among themselves and their organizations, enhancing the movement's potential ability to generate both monetary support and potent alliances and coalitions.

Secularization occurred alongside institutionalization (Moen 1992, 156-160). Religious references were dropped from the titles of some movement organizations and literature, and importantly from general rhetoric in speeches, briefings and other materials intended for public consumption. Such rhetoric has been recast in terms of rights, equality and opportunity, instead of biblical reasoning. Secularization was also evident as Christian Right groups became less separatist and in so doing attracted new allies (Moen 1994, 351). Even non-religious groups that share similar policy agendas have been accepted in some cases as political allies. Leaders have been willing to downplay religious components of the movement when it



benefits the groups politically. On the whole, the Christian Right has grown much more politically sophisticated in recent years.

Institutionalization has also led the Christian Right to support a new focus on grassroots activism and local organization. New interest groups emerged, providing targeted selective incentives and benefits, and these have proved generally successful in mobilizing grassroots support and engendering and sustaining monetary contributions (see, e.g. Moen 1992, 119; Moen 1994, 352-4; Deckman 2004). Grassroots-level policies and activities also have fostered closer ties between local movement groups and organizations and the Republican Party (Oldfield 1996, 228-229; Fowler, Hertzke, and Olson 1999, 97-104).

#### **STEM CELL RESEARCH: EVIDENCE OF THE TRANSFORMATION**

The recent and highly visible public debate over embryonic stem-cell research provides an example of this Christian Right's new strategic activity. Movement leaders and activists participating in this debate believe that life begins at conception, and those who oppose them believe that embryos have not yet reached the point at which they constitute human lives. The issue is therefore framed in precisely the same terms as the abortion debate. From this point of view, the battle is not about imposing certain religious beliefs on the rest of society, but about protecting existing lives. These leaders also advance the idea that adult stem-cell research, which is in their view not morally questionable, offers strong hope for scientific and medical progress. They therefore contend that embryonic stem-cell research is not only unethical, but unnecessary as well. This is not a view widely accepted by the scientific community. Leaders of the Christian Right also claim that embryonic stem-cell research threatens a slippery slope; they fear that if this

research is allowed, human cloning and other procedures they would find equally unethical would be sure to follow, with virtually limitless boundaries and government funding.

Several of the new, key strategies mentioned in the literature on the Christian Right's transition are evident in the Christian Right's fight against embryonic stem-cell research. Local, grassroots activism is now as important as is national-level activities to the Christian Right. Professional and more sophisticated employees are being put to work (for instance) as lobbyists and scientists. Sectarianism has declined and more cohesive, uniform activities and coalitions have increased. And, as we will see in some detail, the use of religious rhetoric has declined substantially, having been replaced by more secular, and in this case also more scientific, language.

### **Diverse Levels of Activism**

Although the Christian Right is deeply engaged in national activity opposing stem-cell research, grassroots-level activities are also apparent. Lobbying activities by movement organizations are occurring at both levels, and a variety of local groups and organizations are engaged in specialized activities. In Florida, for example, Mel Martinez and Bill McCollum, who battled for the Republican nomination for a U.S. Senate seat, were forced by local activists to address the stem-cell issue. Martinez opposed embryonic stem-cell research, and he went on to win the nomination. Perhaps the nomination was not decided based on this issue alone, but both candidates did choose to take a side. Martinez's comment sounded much like the rhetoric used by the religious right, as described in detail below. He said in regards to Alzheimer's disease: "All of us want to see progress in curing these terrible diseases, but not at the price of devaluing our humanity. I cannot condone destroying any life for the sake of medical research" (Limbacher 2004: 1).

A related example and strategy concerns the fact that major organizations, including Christian Coalition, Concerned Women for America, and the Family Research Council, regularly sponsor "Action Alerts," in which supporters are sent e-mail alerts encouraging them to contact local congressman on specific issues at crucial times. The Christian Coalition issued one such alert encouraging its supporters to contact their legislators in support of Mel Gibson's opposition to Proposition 71 in California, which authorized state funding of embryonic stem-cell research (Coombs 2004).

### **Infiltration of Experts**

The Christian Right now employs scientists who can speak in terms that are more likely to appeal to legislators when discussing stem-cell research. The Family Research Council has a specialized department called "The Center for Human Life and Bioethics." The staff of this department issues briefings to supporters explaining the scientific benefits of adult stem-cell research, among many other subjects. Specialized departments and issue experts are in fact utilized in the area of stem-cell research in many Christian Right organizations today. The goal of these departments is to inform both supporters and the public and to generate educated opposition to embryonic stem-cell research at all levels of government.

### **Coalition Building**

Christian Right organizations seeking to prevent embryonic stem-cell research from becoming fully legal also have been able to become more unified in their efforts. Whereas the Christian Right movement previously exhibited many different groups advocating many different types of issues, all in different ways, embryonic stem-cell opposition has been quite uniform. The success and possibilities of adult stem-cell research are promoted

across the board.<sup>1</sup> Public statements by some organizations are redundant. The slippery-slope argument is a recurring theme used by these organizations, as is language referring to one life being promoted over another. Coalitions have been forming around this issue within the Christian Right, as have alliances with groups traditionally outside of the movement such as the Catholic Church. President George W. Bush, himself a declared evangelical and advocate of most, if not all, Christian Right activity, met with Pope John Paul II in support of this opposition. Also, Prison Fellowship, an organization not always affiliated with the Christian Right, has been a leading actor in opposition to embryonic stem-cell research.

### **Declining Use of Religious Rhetoric**

Below I describe the rhetoric used by Christian Right organizations to frame the stem-cell research debate by examining much of the literature they produce on this topic. The method employed is content analysis. My central finding, as expected, is that religious rhetoric is not prominent in this literature; instead, the debate is framed in terms of ethical questions, scientific discussions, and upholding the rights of the embryo.

## **CONTENT ANALYSIS**

### **Methodology**

The content analysis examined the public webpage documents of four Christian Right organizations: The Family Research Council (FRC), Concerned Women for America

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<sup>1</sup> Organizations such as Concerned Women for America, Prison Fellowship, the Family Research Council, the Eagle Forum, Christian Coalition, the Traditional Values Coalition and the American Family Association all use rhetoric promoting the success of Adult Stem-Cell Research.



(CWA), The Eagle Forum (EF) and The Christian Coalition (CC). For comparison, I also examined the documents of The National Right to Life Committee (NRLC), a group that was formed in direct response to the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973. This group has no explicit religious roots, nor do any religious comments or ties appear in its mission statement or on its website, but many of its leaders and followers do have ties to either the Catholic Church or evangelical Protestantism. Furthermore, the NRLC has never been a religious organization in name, which immediately sets it apart from the other organizations in my analysis. Because my analysis ultimately aims to discover whether Christian Right groups have adopted less religious rhetoric, examining the NRLC should not be confounded by its religious subscribers. The NRLC exhibits the same stance on embryonic stem-cell research as do Christian Right groups.

I examined every document regarding the fight against embryonic stem-cell research that was made available on these organizations' web pages between July 1, 2004 and November 2, 2005; I was able to find a vast amount of publications on the FRC, CWA and NRLC websites, and less on the EF and CC websites.<sup>2</sup> FRC posted articles in the following categories: policy publications, fact papers, commentary, legislation alerts, press/current events, and e-mails to their grassroots membership, for a total of 28 documents. CWA had a very organized "library" in which they listed all publications together; 26 of the 131 publications listed (20 percent) focused on stem-cell research. The NRLC had the largest number of articles, 45 in all, probably because the organization focuses exclusively on "life" issues, whereas the other Christian Right organizations are

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<sup>2</sup> A list of all publications used in the study is available from the author

active in a broad spectrum of concerns. Most of their discussion of stem-cell research was in a daily column entitled "Today's News and Views," but there were newspaper articles, letters to members of Congress, and staff comments as well. Both the EF and the CC were less organized and had fewer overall publications than the other organizations. I was able to search the EF website to find 6 documents either from Phyllis Schlafly's columns, radio addresses or action alerts sent to members. The CC website had 14 publications, almost all written by Roberta Combs, the current president of the organization.

My goal in reading these documents was to categorize the rhetoric used when discussing the pros and cons of stem-cell research into either *religiously based* or *secular* categories. My expectation was that these groups would no longer be speaking in primarily religious terms, but would tend instead to employ secular and scientific rhetoric.

To examine secular rhetoric, I documented phrases that fell in the following categories: benefits of adult stem-cell research, the failure of embryonic stem-cell research (or no "proven" results), legal or funding discussion based on poll results, claims of misinformation from the opposing side, destruction of the embryo, or other scientific language. For example, one commonly used phrase in the Family Research Council documents was "federally fund the destruction of human embryos"—this phrase was assumed to be secular and was coded into two categories, discussion of funding and destruction of the embryo. An example of secular "misinformation" claims was this sentence from a CWA document: "Pro-embryonic stem cell research activists are apparently keeping vital information from their publicity-drawing spokesman."

In comparison, I also documented religious, moral or ethical phrases, placing them in the following religiously based

categories: morally or ethically wrong, adoption as a better option (as it assumes life), explicitly religious rhetoric (mentioning God, etc.), or discussion of the sanctity of life and "killing" or "death" of human life. The phrase "angry chorus ready to snuff out small life," from a CWA document, was coded as a reference to the sanctity of life and "kills human embryos" (repeated throughout all organizations' documents) was coded as killing or death of human life.

Most of these phrases were relatively easy to organize. In order to test subjectivity, I performed an intercoder reliability test among the three coders; the intercoder reliability percentage was a strong 89.6 percent, indicating consistency among all coders. The major obstacle that I dealt with was how to handle comments regarding the death or destruction of the embryo. This language might well be thought scientific, although the question of when life begins has been the major controversy surrounding this issue and others, most popularly, abortion. I ultimately categorized the phrase "destruction of embryo" into one of my secular rhetoric categories because neither side argues that the embryo is not destroyed, or that it would be possible for a baby to be born after the embryonic stem-cell research has taken place. Conversely, I placed the phrases "death to human life" or "killing an embryo or fetus" into a religiously based category because this language was usually mixed in with talk about the sanctity of life, a catchphrase of the Christian Right. This distinction was extremely important because 29.5 percent of the language I analyzed fell into one of these two categories.

## RESULTS

Results consistently confirmed the hypothesis. The analysis demonstrates that all Christian Right organizations made an effort to stay away from explicitly religious rhetoric; in fact, less

than 1 percent of their arguments against embryonic stem-cell research could be categorized as religious in tone (see Table 1).

There was some variation between organizations, but several characteristics were constant. There was an emphasis on language that discussed the alleged benefits of adult stem-cell research and the lack of success of embryonic stem-cell research. Also, these organizations consistently used the sanctity of life argument, especially in conjunction with phrases such as "death of the embryo." In many cases, and especially in the case of the Christian Coalition, any kind of legislation was referred to as "federally funded killing of embryos." The organizations also tended to use words like "morally" or "ethically" instead of religious terms like "sin" or "God says..." On a number of dimensions, the Eagle Forum seems to be the most exceptional case, although this could be because there were fewer articles to evaluate.

When comparing Christian Right organizations to the NRLC, some differences are also apparent from the data arrayed in Table 1. Interestingly, the NRLC was much more likely to discuss the death or killing of the embryo instead of using more neutral phrasing such as "destruction of the embryo." Also, the NRLC focused its efforts on maintaining that embryonic stem-cell research should not be funded by government, state or federal, and it spent less time discussing the benefits of adult stem-cell research as compared to the Christian Right organizations. It is not clear why these differences exist between the officially "religious" organizations and the NRLC.



**Table 1**  
**Detailed Content Analysis Results**

Rhetoric Categorizations		Family Research Council	Concerned Women for America	Eagle Forum	Christian Coalition	National Right to Life
Secular Based Rhetoric	Benefits of Adult Stem Cell Research	29.5%	16.5%	23.1%	18.2%	9.8%
	Failure of Embryonic Stem Cell Research, or no "proven" results	9.3%	11.5%	7.7%	10.7%	7.8%
	Legal, funding, polling, taxpayers money	11.9%	12.6%	23.1%	19.0%	27.3%
	Misinformation from other side, other side lies, scientific information to combat this	0.9%	5.8%	0.0%	2.5%	7.0%
	Destruction of embryo	12.3%	11.2%	0.0%	20.7%	7.8%
	Other scientific language	8.4%	6.1%	0.0%	1.7%	4.0%

**Table 1 *contd.***  
**Detailed Content Analysis Results**

Rhetoric Categorizations		Family Research Council	Concerned Women for America	Eagle Forum	Christian Coalition	National Right to Life
Religiously Based Rhetoric	Morally or ethically wrong	14.5%	11.5%	19.2%	13.2%	10.0%
	Adoption as an option for embryos	0.9%	3.6%	3.8%	0.8%	2.5%
	Explicitly religious rhetoric	0.4%	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%
	Death or killing of embryo or sanctity of life	11.9%	19.1%	23.1%	13.2%	23.3%

What is revealing is the fact that when the rhetoric categories are collapsed into the secular/religious dichotomy, the publications of the Christian Right organizations actually employ religious rhetoric less often than does the non-religious NRLC (see Table 2). This further supports the hypothesis that the religious right is seeking strategically to use language that appeals to audiences beyond their religious base. Claiming that God was on their side was not a dominant motif.

Individually, the Christian Coalition was the most secular in its stem-cell language, with over 72 percent of their rhetoric falling into this category. The Family Research Council looks

virtually identical. Once again, the Eagle Forum is the most deviant case: among the religious organizations, it used religious language much more often, indeed nearly half (46.2 percent) of the time.

**Table 2**  
**Religious versus Secular Rhetoric**

<b>Rhetoric Categorization</b>	<b>Family Research Council</b>	<b>Concerned Women for America</b>	<b>Eagle Forum</b>	<b>Christian Coalition</b>	<b>National Right to Life</b>	<b>Christian Right Groups (Collapsed)</b>
<b>Secular Rhetoric</b>	72.2%	63.7%	53.8%	72.7%	63.7%	67.9%
<b>Religiously Based Rhetoric</b>	27.8%	36.3%	46.2%	27.3%	36.3%	32.1%

A difference-of-means test shows that the Eagle Forum's proportion of secular rhetoric was significantly different in comparison to the other Christian Right organizations.<sup>3</sup> What might explain this finding? The most likely explanation is, again, that the difference is largely artificial. It is a function of the fact that the number of Eagle Forum sampled documents was extremely small (6), as were the number of references to stem-

<sup>3</sup>  $\alpha = .05$ ; coding numbers for the FRC, CWA and CC were collapsed to create the comparison group.

cell research (26). Moreover, the documents on the website were almost all written by one person, Phyllis Schlafly, the founder of the organization. For whatever reason, Schlafly has chosen not to prioritize the stem-cell issue, and when she does, she does not frequently employ the technical and scientific arguments common to the other organizations, whose authors are often scientists.

This somewhat deviant case aside, the overall results of this analysis indicate that, at least with regard to stem-cell research, the Christian Right organizations have made an effort to speak about the issue using non-religious verbiage, most likely in order to reach politicians and other audiences that have been turned off in the past by their God-speak. On the Prison Fellowship website, founder and president Chuck Colson poses the question, "Is it not unethical to take a life to save a life?" He goes on to discuss the statements of Joni Tada, a quadriplegic who opposes embryonic stem-cell research: "Today it's not only the disabled who are at risk. Joni warned that we are all vulnerable 'in a society that thinks nothing of creating a class of human beings for the purpose of lethal experimentation and exploitation'" (Colson 2003). By appealing to such ethical rather than religious language and argument, the religious right attempts to frame the issue in terms more likely to attract secular audiences and potential supporters.

The appeal to science and scientific language arguing for the alleged benefits and advantages of adult stem-cell research, and casting embryonic research as unnecessary, serves the same end. Concerned Women for America recently published an article on its website claiming that a paralyzed Korean woman was cured and able to walk because of adult stem-cell research. The article went on to say that:

Adult stem cells, found in the human blood, bone marrow, skin, brain, liver, pancreas, fat, hair follicle, placenta,



contend with on the same level (Fowler, Hertzke, and Olson 1999, 150). As supported by the analysis here, Moen's argument that some secularization has occurred within the Christian Right rings true, but the appropriate balance between religiosity and secular appeal must be struck if the Christian Right is ever to experience greater political success. The balance must be achieved without alienating religious supporters by, for example, undermining through pragmatic compromises what are believed to be essential Christian values. Otherwise, the base of the movement will remain unsatisfied, and any political successes will be meaningless.

Some issues, such as opposition to embryonic stem-cell research and pro-life efforts, have enabled the Christian Right to produce modestly successful, if limited, coalitions. But the movement as a whole remains heavily sectarian. Religious divisions on certain issues cannot be ignored and are politically divisive for supporters. Ironically, stem-cell research itself provides something of an example. Embryonic stem-cell research is divisive because the scientific possibilities represented by its supporters, such as its potential for curing diseases, are almost universally regarded as beneficial. Some of these same supporters also point out that embryos used in stem-cell research, such as unwanted embryos from fertility critics, would likely be destroyed otherwise. As a result, even some conservatives who oppose abortion support embryonic stem-cell research, often pointing out that there are competing fundamental values to the sanctity of life, such as "love of neighbor and social justice" (Lattin 2001). Such arguments have even been used by some to reinforce negative public opinion towards the Christian Right, and the divisiveness of the issue alienates some members of the public who would otherwise label themselves as Christian Right supporters.

umbilical cord and amniotic fluid, show a remarkable possibility of curing disease such as diabetes, heart disease, sickle cell anemia, acute myeloid leukemia, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease and Crohn's disease. They have successfully treated brain tumors, retinoblastoma, multiple myeloma, ovarian, testicular and breast cancers (McGinnis 2004).

Or consider as a similar example what the Family Research Council says about the promise of adult stem-cell research: "Individuals' lives are forever changed with the strengthened faith and renewed hope that arise from healed bodies and physical restoration" (Hughes 2004). This type of framing language exemplifies secularization and underscores the drive for policy success on the part of these interest groups. Religious idealism has given way to a more pragmatic stance and set of strategies.

### CONTINUED STRUGGLE

Despite the strategic adaptations and political sophistication that have shaped the Christian Right movement in recent years, certain weaknesses will never disappear. The Christian Right will always have to deal with the difficult proposition of finding a balance between spiritual purity and political pragmatism in terms of its political involvement (Fowler, Hertzke, and Olson 1999, 140). In addition, sectarianism and religious divisions continue to undermine the movement; it still lacks extensive public credibility; and it must contend with a variety of counter-movements.

The paradox of spirituality and political activism with which the Christian Right must struggle is one problem that secular political movements cannot fully understand—and do not have to

Disagreement over the death penalty has likewise hindered coalition building between Catholic and evangelical groups. Religious pluralism and attendant theological differences, as Fowler and colleagues (1999, 35) observe, often thwarts or limits the extent of "coalition building, which is a must for successful political endeavors." Wald and Corey (2002) describe a concrete example of this in their examination of the Constitutional Revision Committee in the state of Florida; what they found was that sectarianism within the Christian Right caused conflict between these leaders and the Republican Party. It is also noteworthy that there has been a reversal in the once-declining trend in evangelical Protestant denominations, a trend that helped Jerry Falwell when he was organizing the Moral Majority; evangelical denominations are now thriving, a trend likely to make more salient theological differences that can divide Christians and inhibit political cohesiveness (Fowler, Hertzke, and Olson 1999, 34).

While it is certainly incorrect to describe evangelicals and the Christian Right as politically ineffective (Moen 1989), it is true that, in terms of concrete policies, the movement has had only limited success. This can be frustrating for movement supporters; evangelicals have been on the political scene for several decades, and still no crowning political triumph comes to mind. If policy continues to be resistant to the movement's religious ideals and visions, perhaps the evangelical constituency will return its focus to creating its own subculture where these ideals and visions might be able to thrive. Moreover, Robert Booth Fowler (1993, 74) points out that the Christian Right's success at getting issues on the national agenda means nothing if the result is that it loses the so-called "culture war." Pat Buchanan stated at the 1992 Republican National Convention, "There is a religious war going on in this country, a cultural war

as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America" (Davis and Robinson 1997, 39). Although some, including Morris Fiorina (2005), contend that the extent to which Americans are culturally divided is greatly exaggerated, the supposition that there exists a great cultural war nonetheless persists as an important reality in the minds of religious right supporters, and the fact that it persists means that definitive political success for either side remains elusive.

Yet another, long-standing problem for the Christian Right concerns public credibility; leaders cannot seem to shake the negative image associated by many with the movement. This may have to do with media portrayals (Fowler, Hertzke, and Olson 1999, 155) or the often strident and alienating religious rhetoric that was prominent in the early 1980s (and still shows up today), or even the televangelist scandals of the late 1980s, which have not been forgotten. Many also fear church-state entanglement, and in fact many of the goals of the Christian Right do seek to eradicate this divide. Yet others feel that "This movement is a reactionary attempt to reverse progressive social changes such as the evolution of gender roles and increased tolerance of alternative lifestyles" (Fowler, Hertzke, and Olson 1999, 138)—which may also be true. Even those who may support the values of the Christian Right have a hard time identifying with a movement that has been so often criticized and caricatured. Illustrative are recent statements regarding the alleged ignorance of George W. Bush's Christian Rights supporters during the 2004 election, statements leading one observer to remark: "There seems to be a momentum to the logic and world view of the blue-state people.... Anyone who disagrees is just an ignorant rube from a hayseed red state. ...that is the mind-set" (Lorence 2004). Thomas Frank, author of the controversial book *What's the Matter with Kansas*, describes in



the New York Times (2004) a recently published book, entitled *The Great Divide: Retro vs. Metro America*, in these terms: "We can see from electoral maps that the most Republican areas also tend to be dominated by Southern Baptists, Methodists or Lutherans; these three denominations are therefore lumped together as evangelical churches, a term which is soon upgraded to evangelical-fundamentalist and then charged by the authors with inexcusable backwardness." Needless to say, there are no conclusive studies showing that Christian Right supporters are any less informed than the average American when they decide for whom to cast their vote. But many who disagree with them continue to feel that this is the case.

The Christian Right also continues to lack a strong, unifying leader. Many organizations and a variety of leaders have been holding the movement together since Pat Robertson's decline in 1988, but no one has since emerged to unify and lead these groups as a whole. A uniting personality might enable the Christian Right to act in concert across many issues, and this would likely increase its prospects for greater political success.

The Christian Right has always been a complex movement that cannot be described exclusively in terms of success or failure. The mobilization of evangelicals was a lengthy process involving major changes in the perspectives of both clergy and church members. It was born as a countermovement to the "liberal" 1960s. Although there has been no definitive policy triumph for the Christian Right, it is incorrect to say that the movement has been ineffective, particularly in recent years. The strength of the Christian Right is its politically unified and active evangelical base, and also its ability to adapt, especially as demonstrated by its institutionalization, secularization, and the move from national to more local activism. Those who claim the

movement is a failure speak too hastily, as the grassroots base remains robust and adaptive strategies remain popular.

### CONCLUSION

In many ways, the evolution of the Christian Right has followed the path of "growth, decay and change" ascribed to social movements by Zald and Ash (1966). The movement has been manifested in many different organizations, and it has outlived them all. Institutionalization and secularization have helped accommodate the movement to the broader society. Support for the movement continues, despite its limited policy successes, and the goals of the Christian Right now encompass many different issues at the national, state and local levels. Zald and Ash also describe a tendency in movement organizations to compromise and build coalitions with other organizations, a tendency not altogether absent, but certainly not pronounced, in the case of the Christian Right. They also argue that a change in societal conditions may affect support of the movement; for the Christian Right, perceived and actual changes in the 1960s and 1970s were crucial for mobilizing supporters. On the other hand, Zald and Ash's description of "A Movement Becalmed" may as well have been specifically describing the Christian Right:

Many MO's [movement organizations] do not represent either successes or failures. They have been able to build and maintain a support base; they have waged campaigns which have influenced the course of events; and they have gained some positions of power. In short, they have created or found a niche for themselves in the organizational world.... Members do not expect attainment of goals in the near future (Zald and Ash 1966, 334).

Hence the Christian Right does in many respects resemble other social movements, whether described by Zald and Ash or by those who follow in their footsteps: "When compared to the early movement, then, the mature movement is likely to be larger, less spontaneous, better organized, and largely led by formal organizations" (Marx and McAdam 1994, 95). This does not mean that similarities between religious and secular movements apply across the board, but it does mean that many generalizations about social movements apply to the development and current nature of the Christian Right. This includes the likely deployment by social movements of framing, exemplified in the Christian Right's attempt to define the embryonic stem-cell research issue in terms of the embryo's human rights, in contrast to those who frame the issue in terms of helping the ill and infirm.

At the same time, the experiences of the Christian Right illuminate the tension between purity and pragmatism that cannot be escaped in political activism. A balance must be found that does not alienate base supporters, and yet can reach out to enough of society to make the goals of a movement achievable. Without some amount of compromise, a movement would never gain any political access. However, too much concession dilutes a movement, discourages supporters, and can diminish or invalidate the original goals. There are always costs associated with strategy changes, and movement leaders must address these costs in a way that appeases their base.

All social movements must find a way into the political system. This often requires a considerable expenditure of resources since social movements favor sweeping changes not welcomed by most political actors. In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, leaders were able to find their way in through the court system and unconventional political participation; in

the case of the Christian Right, the movement was able to infiltrate the Republican Party. Throughout this process, leaders must learn to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the movement, and to exploit the former and reduce the latter. These strengths and weaknesses may not be apparent at the outset, and therefore it is crucial that movements allow themselves to mature according to their individual political situation, as the Christian Right has attempted to do.

The necessity of a strong, centralizing leader for movement success may be overrated. The Christian Right has survived changes of several different leaders, many of whom had significantly negative and controversial declines. The movement has nonetheless continued, and indeed grown, for years. The emergence of a unifying leader would most likely benefit the Christian Right, but the movement has enjoyed a modicum of success even without such a leader.

The Christian Right is an example of a social movement that has managed to mature past most expectations, survive through leaders, organizations, and public scandal. Although its religious component perhaps provides supporters extra incentive to devote time and resources to its causes, the Christian Right is in general just another social movement experiencing limited success in a realm of competing ideologies and interests. It has become more politically sophisticated, as evidenced by its oppositional strategies to embryonic stem-cell research, but it has to this point been unable to bring about any permanent transformation of American politics or culture.



## APPENDIX A

## ARTICLES USED IN CONTENT ANALYSIS

**Christian Coalition—[www.christiancoalition.org](http://www.christiancoalition.org)**

President George W. Bush gave a remarkable speech this month regarding protection of human life

Roberta Combs

May 28,  
2004

Christian Coalition commends Majority Leader Bill Frist for his Senate floor speech on Stem Cell Research

Roberta Combs

October 17,  
2004

Christian Coalition Commends Mel Gibson for His Strong Stance Against Proposition 71 - the \$3 Billion Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research Initiative on California Ballot

Roberta Combs

October 28,  
2004

President George W. Bush to Urge Even Stricter Limits on Human Embryo Research

Roberta Combs

February 4,  
2005

Christian Coalition to Score as Negative Vote a vote for the Pro-Abortion "Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act"

Roberta Combs

April 1,  
2005

Bill to Overturn President Bush's Policy Against Federal Funding for Embryonic Destruction Research Expected to be Voted on in U.S. House Sometime Soon

Roberta Combs

May 13,  
2005

President Bush Vows to Veto a Bill Which Overturns His Policy Against Federal Funding for Embryonic Destruction Research Which will be Voted on in U.S. House of Representatives Tuesday

Roberta Combs May 22, 2005

Castle/DeGette "Human Embryo Destruction" Bill Falls Far Short of Votes Required to Overturn President Bush's Certain Veto

Roberta Combs May 27, 2005

United States Senate Expected to Vote on Stem Cell Research/Human Cloning Bills Next Week

Roberta Combs July 15, 2005

Statement by Roberta Combs on Embryonic Stem Cell Research

Roberta Combs July 29, 2005

The Stem Cell Debate

August 22, 2005

Christian Coalition Urges Senate to Delay Embryonic Stem Cell Vote

August 23, 2005

Support for embryonic stem cell destruction falls

August 25, 2005

Embryonic Stem Cell bill scheduled for 2006 vote

October 26, 2005

**Concerned Women for America—www.cwfa.org**

What 'the American People Deserve' on Stem-Cell Research	Megan Roberts	July 1, 2004
Fact Sheet on Stem Cell Research	Elaine McGinnis	August 3, 2004
CWA Commentary: Stem Cell Advocacy: Power Over Morality	Wendy Wright	August 10, 2004
Harvard Stem-Cell Research: How the Mighty Are Fallen	Anne F. Downey, Esq.	March 9, 2005
Advocates Suppress Poll Data, Opposing Viewpoint to Promote Embryonic Stem-Cell Bill	Wendy Wright	May 21, 2005
The Dark Side of the Force: Embryonic Stem-Cell Research	Anne F. Downey, Esq.	May 24, 2005
Fight to Fund Embryonic Stem-Cell Research Rages On	Elaine McGinnis	May 26, 2005
Snowflakes in May	Sara Brode	May 26, 2005
Snowflake' Parents Speak on Capitol Hill		June 1, 2005
Project 535 Hosts Medical Ethics Day on Capitol Hill	Elaine McGinnis	June 27, 2005
The Who-ville of Our Times: Human Embryos at Risk	Karen Jo Gounaud	June 29, 2005
Stem Cell, Cloning Bills to Hit Senate Soon	Elaine McGinnis	July 11, 2005

Stars, Stem Cells, Handlers & the Truth		July 18, 2005
Embryonic Stem Cell Promotion Driven by Money		July 30, 2005
Sample Letter to Senator Frist Regarding ESCR		August 1, 2005
Election 2004: Stem Cell Research	Janet M. LaRue	October 25, 2005
CWA's LaRue Addresses Stem-Cell Issue in Washington Post's Online Chat	Pamela Wong	October 27, 2005
Federal Funds Go to Embryo Adoption		October 28, 2005
Abortion, Stem Cell Research Are Subjects of Voter Initiatives in Florida and California	Wendy Wright	November 2, 2005

**The Eagle Forum—www.eagleforum.org**

What Do the Two Parties Stand For?		October 1, 2004
Spending Bush's "Political Capital"	Phyllis Schlafly	January 5, 2005
Exploring A Brave New World	Phyllis Schlafly	April 1, 2005
We Are All Former Embryos, Tell Your Member of Congress to vote NO on H.R. 810		May 23, 2005
Frist Support Killing Human Embryos, Tell Senator Frist you can't be pro-life and support killing embryos!		July 29, 2005
Talk with your Members of Congress while they are in the district!		August 2, 2005



**Family Research Council—www.frc.org**

The Ethics of Embryonic Stem Cell Research and Human Cloning	Dr. Robert P. George	April 17, 2004
The Unchosen Frozen: Second Thoughts on Biotechnology and In Vitro Fertilization	William Saunders, Esq.	May 4, 2004
California Voters Approve Taxpayer Funding of Embryonic Stem Cell Research		November 3, 2004
Adult vs. Embryonic: It's a Difference Between Life & Death	Tony Perkins	November 9, 2004
Walking Evidence for Adult Stem Cells		May 29, 2005
Gotta Get Castle-DeGette	Tony Perkins	June 6, 2005
Spinal Cord Injury Treatments		July 11, 2005
Parkinson's Treatments		July 12, 2005
Adult Stem Cell Pluripotency		July 13, 2005
Tell your Senators to Oppose Funding Embryonic Stem Cell Research		July 14, 2005
Heart Treatments		July 14, 2005
Diabetes Treatments		July 15, 2005
FRC Statement on Frist Support for Embryonic Stem Cell Research		July 29, 2005

Human Embryo Destruction Ban		August 3, 2005
Ineffective Stem Cell Research	Tony Perkins	August 18, 2005
Embryonic Stem Cell Studies Raise Questions, Not Cures	Tony Perkins	October 17, 2005

**National Right to Life Committee—www.nrlc.org**

National Right to Life Responds to Ron Reagan's Pro-Cloning at Democratic National Convention	Megan Dillon	July 28, 2004
Stem Cell Research: Fiction vs. Fact		August 1, 2004
Revelation of the Nerds	William Saletan	August 10, 2004
Majority Opposes Tax Funding of Stem cell Research That Kills Human Embryos	Megan Dillon	August 23, 2004
Email to Journalists and Commentators	Douglas Johnson	August 24, 2004
Reuters News Service Editor Stirs Controversy with Angry E-mail about unborn and President Bush; Reuters "Pipe Bomb" Story Also Questioned		September 5, 2004
108th Congress the Most Successful Yet for Pro-Life Movement	Douglas Johnson	September 29, 2004
An Edwards Outrage	Charles Krauthammer	October 15, 2004
What the election results mean for the new Congress	Douglas Johnson	November 4, 2004
108th Congress the Most Successful Yet for Pro-Life Movement	Douglas Johnson	November 9, 2004

Pro-Life Movement Faces Opportunities, Challenges in New Congress		January 3, 2005
Help Fight "Media Myths" on Human Cloning Bills!		May 1, 2005
Urgent Congressional Alert: Urge Congress to Reject Embryo-Killing Research		May 5, 2005
A Trifecta of Important Developments -- Part One	Dave Andrusko	May 11, 2005
Romney Expected to Veto Bill -- Part Two	Dave Andrusko	May 11, 2005
Letter to House of Representatives	David N. O'Steen	May 11, 2005
Maintain President Bush's Pro-Life Policy on Federal Funding of Embryonic Stem Cell Research -- Part One	Dave Andrusko	May 17, 2005
The Debate Begins: Stem Cells -- Part Three	Dave Andrusko	May 20, 2005
Letter to House of Representatives	David N. O'Steen	May 23, 2005
U.S. House Will Vote Tuesday, May 24, on H.R. 810, a Bill to Fund Stem Cell Research That Kills Human Embryos -- Advocates of Bill Admit It is "Critical First Step" to Cloning		May 23, 2005
National Right to Life Comments on U.S. House and White House Actions on Stem Cell Research		May 24, 2005

I Lived So Long -- Part One	Dave Andrusko	May 25, 2005
President Bush Discusses Embryo Adoption and Ethical Stem Cell Research -- Part Two	Dave Andrusko	May 25, 2005
U.S. House Votes to Fund Embryo-Killing Research, 238-194; President Bush Vows Veto if Senate Also Approves		June 2, 2005
Letter to Senator	David N. O'Steen	June 13, 2005
What are we learning-- Part One	Dave Andrusko	June 23, 2005
Breaking Through the Blackout	Dave Andrusko	June 27, 2005
U.S. House Committee Rejects Amendment to Erect Barrier to Human Cloning in U.S.		June 29, 2005
It's Been A Great Year	Dave Andrusko	June 29, 2005
NRLC statement on Senator Bill Frist's July 29, 2005 speech on embryonic stem cell research		July 1, 2005
The Emperor's New Stem Cell Cure	Jean Swenson	July 15, 2005
Drawing a Historical Lesson -- Part Two	Dave Andrusko	August 11, 2005
The Cultural Divide-- Part Two	Dave Andrusko	August 12, 2005
They Keep on Coming....-- Part Two	Dave Andrusko	August 23, 2005
Congressional Clashes near on major Pro-life issues		August 31, 2005



No human embryos created or destroyed: Embryonic Stem Cells Created from Skin Cell	Dave Andrusko	September 1, 2005
Looking Ahead...	Dave Andrusko	September 1, 2005
Have You Heard the Good News about Adult and Umbilical Cord Blood Stem Cells? Probably Not.	Wesley J. Smith	September 29, 2005
Kerry on Abortion: Recent Words Don't Square with his 20-Year Record	Douglas Johnson	October 1, 2005
National Right To Life Commentary		October 9, 2005
Two New Studies in "Nature? Raise Hopes, Questions	Dave Andrusko	October 24, 2005
If Read Carefully...	Dave Andrusko	October 25, 2005
A Recurring, Unsavory Movement		October 26, 2005

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